1: Honigmann E-5 (1943-1945) 1949 ND12 Nahane ND12

SETTING

THE KASKA AREA

THE fifteen thousand square miles constituting the intermontane region occupied by the Kaska Indians west of the Rocky Mountains are divided between uninhabited mountainous terrain visited for hunting and trapping, and wide, rolling river valleys in which a sparsely distributed population carries on the bulk of its activities. Running away from these river valleys the country becomes increasingly hilly as it proceeds toward the eastern Rocky Mountains and the western Cordillera (Fig. 1). North of Frances Lake and south of Dease Lake these mountain systems come close together to provide the natural frontiers of the Kaska area. About halfway up Dease River from Lower Post, an offshoot of the Cordillera—the Cassiar Mountains—transects the country from northwest to southeast. Other minor ranges, including the Simpson Mountains, traverse the region between Frances Lake, on the north, and the Liard River, on the south.

The mountains provide sources for the numerous rivers and creeks that drain the country. All of these waters flow into the Liard River, which empties into the Mackenzie, and, eventually, reach the Arctic Ocean. The rivers are generally fast and shallow and marked by many sloughs. Their crooked courses are interrupted by numerous places where the current is swift and turbulent and by several narrow canyons which are impassable. A number of small lakes are also scattered throughout the area.

The climate of the country alternates between hot summer days with cool evenings, and cold winters in which the temperature hovers around twenty degrees below zero and even reaches sixty or seventy degrees below. Frosts set in around the middle of August and by early September the few deciduous trees have lost their color. Several weeks of intermittent rainfall can be expected after the first of September. When this period ends, the willows and poplars are free of leaves. By late October the rivers run with slush, small lakes and sloughs are frozen, and ice is beginning to form along the shores of the larger streams. Dry snow falls from the middle of October. After the middle of November even the larger rivers are covered with ice except for a few stretches of swift, open water. Winter has set in. In the Upper Liard area snow reaches a depth of fifteen inches by Christmas and three or four feet by the end of January. Around the beginning of March the dry, powdery snow of winter becomes moist under the warmer sun and the prevailing westerly wind (the Chinook), and the surface of the snow begins to form a thick, heavy crust. In April the river ice begins to break and the streams run with ice floes. The northern latitude of the area is associated with long days in summer. In late June and early July the sun rises at about 2:30 A.M. and sets about 10:30 P.M. Complete darkness is absent during this period. In winter long nights are the rule, the sun rising about 9:30 A.M. in December and setting at about 3:00 P.M. Because of its low position on the southern horizon, however, the winter sun is not warming.

The country, part of the circumpolar boreal forest belt, is marked by a predominance of coniferous flora. The principal species include red and black spruce and jack-pine; balsam

1: Honigmann E-5 (1943-1945) 1949 ND12 Nahane ND12

131
133
487

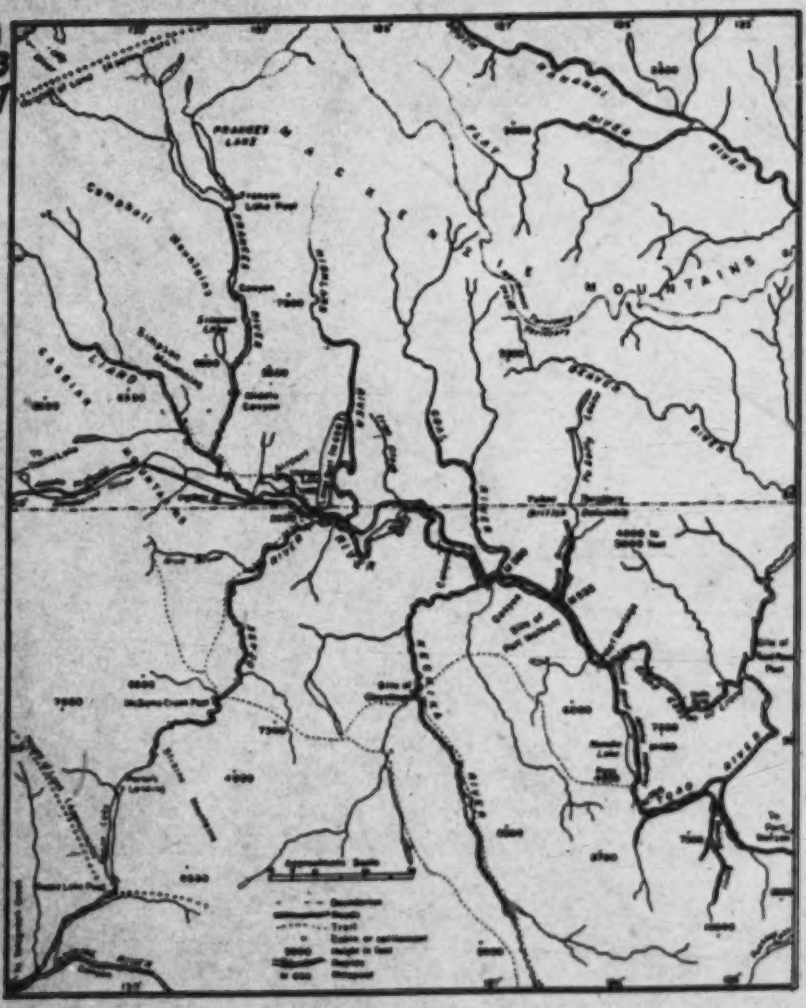

FIG. 1. Map of the Cassiar and Adjacent Area.

Habitat

The Tahltan claim very considerable area of country in the Cassiar district of British Columbia, the southern extremity of their territories touching latitude 56 and the northern extremity latitude 60. East and west their country extends from the Cascade to the Cassiar Range. The upper Stikine may be called the center of their territory. They control all the drainage basin of this river and only in a few places do they extend beyond to some of the neighboring feeders of the waters of the Taku, Nass, Skeena, Mackenzie and Yukon Rivers. 131

Characteristics of the Country

The region occupied by the Tahltan is of a semi-mountainous and semi-forested character. There are extensive areas of plateau and rolling country lightly timbered or for the most part open. As the timber line is low in this latitude and much of the country is equal in elevation to or above the timber line a great deal of country (all the higher parts) is almost devoid of timber. The lower plateaux and valleys are generally well timbered with trees of medium and small size - although nowhere growing thickly as on the Coast, nor is there anywhere much under brush as in the latter region. Many of the upper valleys are grassy or mossy in character and have very little timber. Moss is plentiful both in the open country and in the forests, and muskegs are often to be met with. The slopes of the hills and mountains, especially in the more easterly and westerly parts of the country, are often steep and rocky. The country as a whole shows much signs of erosion and in some places its nature is volcanic. The valley of the Stikine River, commencing immediately east of the Cascades for a distance of some forty miles, is drier than the rest of the country and resembles a good deal in appearance and flora some valleys further south in the Dry Belt of British Columbia. /To the/ west, in the Cascade or Coast mountains, where the Stikine and other streams pierce the range, the country assumes a different appearance, becoming very mountainous and rocky; glaciers and snow fields abound, and the lower valleys become gorge-like in character, with heavy timber and underbrush where the soil is not too rocky. Here the climate becomes cooler, and proceeding westwards the rainfall and snow fall become heavier and heavier. 133 137 133 134 [137] 132

6: Honigmann E-5 (1943-1945)1954 ND12 Nahane ND12

INTRODUCTION

THE present monograph is intended primarily to describe the aboriginal and time-of-contact lifeways of the Kaska Indians of northern British Columbia and southern Yukon Territory, Canada (Fig. 1). The writer's principal object has been to add to present knowledge concerning the Northern Athapaskan Indians. As far as the organization of the material is concerned, the cultural data follow this introduction, which includes, in addition to these preliminary remarks, a description of the environment (based mainly on contemporary observation), tribal distribution and nomenclature, population data, a sketch of psychological types, and an index of principal informants.[1] The description of aboriginal Kaska culture is divided into five main sections covering, respectively, data pertaining to the food quest, camp life and some associated activities, social organization, ideological system, and the life cycle. These main divisions are in turn further broken down. For many of the dress patterns, implements, and behaviors, alternatives are indicated. It must be kept in mind that evidence does not warrant the assumption that all such alternatives existed simultaneously.

Information has been obtained primarily from the Upper Liard and Dease River Kaska (Fig. 2). When available, data from other Kaska groups follow these two in the following order: Tselona, Espatotena, and Frances Lake Kaska. References to adjacent tribes, like the Tahltan, Pelly River people, Bear Lake Sekani, and Tlingit will be found in footnotes.

ENVIRONMENT

To the person who has not been raised to love the prairie the Cassiar, as the northwestern area of British Columbia and southern Yukon Territory is often called,[2] must appeal as a colorful and exciting region. Lying between the Rocky Mountains on the east and the Coast Range to the west the country is bounded north and south by water sheds of considerable height. Geologically the Cassiar may be considered as a portion of the Yukon Plateau.[3] Between the eastern and western ranges the land is rolling and crossed from northwest to southeast by the Cassiar Mountains, which extend from Teslin Lake to the headwaters of the Finlay River (Fig. 2). Below McDame Creek, 80 miles south of Lower Post, the Dease River cuts a gorge through the Cassiar Mountains

[1] The history of the Cassiar and its people will not be presented in this monograph, since it has already been written in some detail. See Honigmann, *Culture and Ethos of Kaska Society* (1949), 38–50; Seidmore, *Sikhine River in 1898* (1899).

[2] For an impressionistic picture of the area see Turton, *Cassiar* (1934). The term Yukon is apparently derived from the Athapaskan word for Northern Lights, yukąąa. (Cf. Osgood, *Ingalik Material Culture* [1940], 459.) Le Jeune, however, derives the territory's name from a supposed "Yuki" (Wicked Ones) Indian tribe. Le Jeune, *Dictionnaire Général du Canada* (1931), II, 826.

[3] Lees, *Geology of Teslin-Quiet Lake Area, Yukon* (1936), 5. See also Hanson and McNaughton, *Eagle-McDame Area, Cassiar District, British Columbia* (1936), 2–3; Kerr, *Dease Lake Area, Cassiar District, B. C.* (1936). For maps the reader is referred to Honigmann, *Culture and Ethos of Kaska Society* (1949), 33, 34.

6: Honigmann E-5 (1943-1945)1954 ND12 Nahane ND12

101
131
133

FIG. 2. Map of the Cassiar and Its People.

6: Honigmann E-5 (1943-1945)1954 ND12 Nahane ND12

at Pine Rapids. Above McDame the river passes west of the Horseranch Mountains, a spur of the Cassiar Range. The more rugged features of the district are somewhat softened at the confluence of the Dease and Liard rivers, the site of Lower Post. It is this region, actually extending westward from Smith River to Watson Lake, which Williams has described as "a rolling plateau deeply covered with sand and gravel, and varied by low rounded hills and deep, well forested stream valleys."[4] Bisecting the Cassiar from north to south is the so-called Rocky Mountain Trench, one of the proposed routes for the Alaska Highway that has also been surveyed from Prince George to Watson Lake for a railroad. The survey line can still be followed and crosses the Alaska Highway a few hundred feet east of Lower Post.[5]

The Cassiar is drained by several large rivers including, from west to east, the Frances, Dease, Hyland, Kechika (Muddy), Coal, Rock, and Smith. The lower reaches of the Kechika or Muddy River are sometimes referred to as the Turnagain or Black River. All of these run into the easterly flowing Liard, which in turn enters the Mackenzie at Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories, whose waters finally reach the Arctic Ocean. In spring and early summer the streams are swift and deep. Toward autumn the water level recedes considerably but the numerous rapids always render river navigation difficult and sometimes hazardous. "Rising in the elevated country west of the Rocky Mountains, the Liard falls rapidly toward the east, the difference in elevation between the mouth of the Dease and the Mackenzie amounting to nearly 1,650 feet, and is characterized nearly everywhere by impetuous currents, by dangerous rapids and narrow whirlpool cañons."[6] About 50 miles below Lower Post is Hell's Gate, the most famous of the Liard's rapids. Here the river cuts its torturous route through the barrier of the Rockies. The spring break-up of the frozen Liard is reported to be particularly spectacular in this canyon where huge slabs of ice pile up with pressure increasing behind them until, with a terrific roar that can be heard for miles, the mass gives way and charges through the narrow, cavelike opening. The difficulties associated with water transportation up the Liard from Fort Simpson were largely responsible for the abandonment, in 1865, of Fort Halkett, the Hudson's Bay Company post at the confluence of the Liard and Smith rivers (Fig. 2). Since that date the principal means of access to the Cassiar has been from the south, travelers, among whom gold seekers occupied a prominent place, journeying up the Stikine River from Wrangell, Alaska, to Telegraph Creek, B. C. From here they crossed the height of land to reach the foot of Dease Lake, 200 miles south of Lower Post. By 1946 this route was rapidly falling into abeyance as the Alaska Highway provided a new and modern means of access.

The climate of the intermontane Cassiar is seasonally variable. In summer, as elsewhere in the northern forest, the days are hot and temperatures reach 90 degrees in the

[4] Williams, *Geological Reconnaissance along the Alaska Highway from Fort Nelson, British Columbia, to Watson Lake, Yukon* (1944), 2. See also McConnell, *Report on an Exploration in the Yukon and Mackenzie Basins* (1890), 8D.

[5] In 1950 the New York newspapers reported fresh talk of a proposed railroad to extend from Prince George to Fairbanks, Alaska, passing through Lower Post.

[6] McConnell, *Report on an Exploration in the Yukon and Mackenzie Basins* (1890), 34D.

6: Honigmann E-5 (1943-1945)1954 ND12 Nahane ND12

that the Kaska Indians had known moose "a long, long time ago." Subsequently the animal disappeared and when it returned the people had lost the art of hunting the animal. Informants spoke of aboriginal techniques for hunting moose, indicating that the animal entered the region prior to the beginning of acculturation. Linguistically it is interesting to compare the Kaska word for moose, gatɔ or ketɔ, with the terms kǫlǫn and ulǫn used by the Fort Nelson Slave. Elk and deer were more certainly originally absent in the Cassiar and have only recently begun to appear west of the Rockies. Thus a deer was killed about seven miles southeast of the confluence of the Liard and Frances rivers about 1928. In the summer of 1944 Indians expressed great interest in what were presumed to be deer tracks encountered in the soft shoulders of the Alaska Highway near Lower Post. Similar tracks appeared along the Liard near the confluence of the Frances River. Perhaps the highway has been responsible for the animal's intensified westerly migration. According to Williams, "the most northerly herd of wapiti (elk) is resident in the vicinity of Tuchodi Lake," the source of the Smith River.[13] Weasel and skunk are also reported to be recent arrivals in the district. Wild fowl include grouse, spruce (fool) hens, ptarmigan, owl, eagle, crow, swan, loon, and a relatively small number of geese and duck. In summer Lower Post harbors a small colony of swallows but they originally came from England. Rivers and lakes contain grayling sucker, trout, whitefish, loche (ling), and pike. Watson Lake, 23 miles northwest of Lower Post, once provided an important source of whitefish for the Indians.[14] Salmon are known to run in the Stikine, Pelly, and Ross rivers but are absent from the region of which we speak.

A geographically interesting feature of the region is the hot springs that erupt about 100 miles east of Lower Post. These warm, sulphurous waters have long excited interest in the Cassiar, giving rise to stories of hidden and mysterious "tropical valleys."[15] The writer visited one of these springs located about a mile west of the bridge where the Alaska Highway makes its easternmost crossing of the Liard. The vegetation is indeed more luxuriant near the pool of warm water and photographs prove that the springs resist freezing in winter. The area of such exuberant growth, however, is extremely circumscribed.[16]

KASKA TRIBES AND THEIR NEIGHBORS

Sometime within the past 20,000 years man probably first set foot in the Cassiar. The immediate point from which those early settlers had migrated presumably lay somewhere to the northwest. At a somewhat greater distance in time and space the forefathers

[13] Williams, *Geological Reconnaissance along the Alaska Highway from Fort Nelson, British Columbia, to Watson Lake, Yukon* (1944), 3.

[14] Named after a Yorkshireman who settled there and married an Indian woman. Watson is dead but in 1945 Mrs. Watson continued to live near the airdrome at the Lake with her daughters, a son-in-law (a Beaver Indian cattle), and two grandchildren.

[15] Johnston, *Gold Placers of Dease Lake Area, Cassiar District, B. C.* (1926), 38A; Godsell, *Romance of the Alaska Highway* (1944), 86-92.

[16] See also Williams, *Geological Reconnaissance along the Alaska Highway from Fort Nelson, British Columbia, to Watson Lake, Yukon* (1944), 31.